

TEXTUAL DEGENERATION OF ELIZABETHAN
AND STUART PLAYS: AN EXAMINATION
OF PLAYS IN MANUSCRIPT

LET ME begin by stating as clearly as I can the purpose of this exploratory study. It has seemed to me that in accounting for variation among Elizabethan and post-Elizabethan dramatic texts too little weight has been given to the activities of prompters and actors as compared with those of printers and copyists. According to R. B. McKerrow and Evelyn Albright,¹ the incompetence of printers has been greatly exaggerated, and the defense they offer seems sound and just, and, as for copyists, they seem, as a class, to have been the most efficient of those who worked on plays. On the other hand, the conditions of play production, now, in the Elizabethan age and in general, are such as not only to provoke alteration of texts but to necessitate it. The simplest investigation of the history of Shakespeare on the stage (and on the screen) will reveal habitual and not infrequently violent modifications of his texts and even of his intentions. A visit to a production lot will convince any visitor that the producer feels free to alter the script without any reference to the author or what he has written. I remember a conversation in 1908 with Eugene Walter, whose *Paid in Full* was then *en vogue*, and of hearing him describe without the least offense, indeed with pride, the great changes made in his play when it was produced on Broadway. Stage alterations are and have been since the Elizabethan age and before the merest commonplace and by no means inconsiderable. Notwithstanding this fact, critics of Elizabethan dramatic texts have usually proceeded on a strictly documentary basis as if they had to do with classical or ancient Hebrew works passed

down from copyist to copyist, copyist to printer, and printer to printer. The point is that the chain of succession was broken by an extraneous force. Neither copyist nor compositor, however faulty their work may sometimes have been, had usually any desire to make changes as such, whereas actors had and still have professional needs and personal motives for making them.

A great deal of work has been done on the classification of printed plays, and the subject is fairly well misunderstood. Most of it is highly speculative. Indeed, for the most part it rests on unsupported speculation, and that habit of conjecture has resulted in such confusion that it may be said that it is now almost impossible to construct a definitive text of any Elizabethan play of which there exist more than one early version. The examination of the field cannot, however, claim to be complete until all plays in manuscript have been subjected to scrutiny. That is the purpose of the investigation reported in this paper. It is necessary also to state the basis of procedure. In order to classify the documents under consideration it is necessary to determine on the basis of existing evidence what kinds or forms of plays the conditions of the time and the practices of dramatic enterprise actually brought into existence. If we can establish such a set of facts, we shall have the criteria necessary for the task. That task is to examine all available plays in manuscript in order to see what evidence they supply of theatrical modifications of dramatic texts.²

There would be, first of all, an author's original manuscript. Such documents seem to have been referred to during the period under consideration as the author's "foul papers." Of a given play they would be in textual matters authentic and final as distinguished from neat and orderly. I hope there is

no Shakespeare scholar left alive whose adulation would cause him to deny that the first manuscript of Shakespeare himself would be to some degree disordered. In the second place, the foul papers might be of two sorts: the foul papers of a new play and those of a revision. Again I hope that no living scholar will reject the many times multiplied evidence that Shakespeare, as well as Ben Jonson and other playwrights, did revise his plays. It is obvious that the manuscript of a play that had been worked over and greatly changed, although after a fashion still legible, might need to be re-copied for submission to the censor and for the use of the company.³

Thirdly, there would also come into existence by custom and necessity a transcript of the author's original manuscript. Indeed, the very idea of the foul papers calls for a clean copy. Such a copy would be demanded for submission to the censor and, having been submitted to the censor and his requirements complied with, would become the licensed playbook of the theatrical company for which it had been written. In preparation for staging, players' parts and possibly a plat would be prepared, and the prompter would mark the manuscript in such a way that it would serve his needs when the play was acted on the stage. Most playwrights would supply stage directions, but they would ordinarily not be sufficiently practical to suit the prompter's needs. It is agreed that he would be careful to note entrances, stage properties needed in the action; also music and offstage noises. If we may judge from the facsimile of *Believe as You List*, the prompter did not concern himself with stage directions that pertained to the interpretation of plays.

In the fourth place, indeed beginning with the original markings of the clean copy by the prompter, we have a sug-

gestion of another class of dramatic versions, namely, stage versions. They would, however, hardly be so defined unless such plays had been cut down and definitely adapted to another stage than that for which they had been written.⁴ This situation appears in the group of plays that A. W. Pollard called "bad" quartos. The theories that would account for such shortened and more or less stage-worn plays, although widely accepted, are lacking in factual support and need not concern us at this time. It should, however, be stated that effects of stage use vary in amount according no doubt to the experience of the play. All of the texts of the First Folio of 1623 for which there are documents for comparison show stage alteration in varying degrees, and in that fact there is a proof of the universality of stage influence on acted plays. Stage degeneration is not now confined to Pollard's original list of five plays. The list has been very greatly, although not always wisely, extended.⁵ The evidences are so general that one may say that stage alteration appears in all plays that have been acted on the stage. We content ourselves, however, with cases where the facts can be definitely ascertained.

Finally, it is abundantly clear from the play manuscripts we are about to examine that a considerable number of plays were transcribed for presentation to private persons. Some of them are transcripts of stage versions or prompt-books, others of clean copies and still others from foul papers. The manuscript of *Bonduca*, for example, was copied from foul papers, several are from clean copies, others are the actual playbooks of dramatic companies, and at least one, *John of Bordeaux*, was copied, like the manuscript book of *The Battle of Alcazar*, from a badly degenerated stage version. Some transcripts for private persons were apparently copies from one another. This appears clearly in *A Game at Chess* and in William Cartwright's *The Royal Slave*.⁶

It has been possible under the conditions described above to ascertain the state and classification of forty-eight plays in manuscript. Thirty of these can in the state of the case yield no results, since there exist no versions or texts with which these manuscript versions can be compared. Several of them invite speculation, but the ruin of dramatic scholarship in the field of Elizabethan and Stuart drama has been for the last forty years unsupported conjecture, and one would not add to that mass and mess. There remain eighteen plays in manuscript that seem to be cases in point.⁷

It happens that there are preserved no less than ten manuscript plays by Beaumont and Fletcher and that there are two publications of plays by these authors or groups of authors in folio, that of 1647 and that of 1679. These plays thus constitute an interesting special group that we shall take up first. As for three of them, *Sir John van Olden Barnevelt*⁸ was first published by Bullen in 1883; *The Faithful Friends*⁹ was first published by Weber in 1812; and *Bonduca*¹⁰ is an imperfect copy by Ralph Crane of foul papers and cannot be safely compared with the text of the play in the Folio of 1647, although that text was certainly printed from a stage original.

*The Beggars Bush*¹¹ is a case in point. The manuscript has been annotated for performance by a playhouse scrivener and has theatrical cuts. The text in the folio has been printed also from a theatrical prompt-book, but not from the original of the manuscript. The two texts have few significant differences, but those differences are the measure of a certain amount of use on the stage of the folio version. The theory of increasing variation of theatrical texts according to amount of use seems perfectly confirmed by the differences between the texts of the folio of 1647 and that of 1679. The latter folio, which Waller and Glover¹² use as the basis of

their edition, has made use of a much more stage-worn version, and these editors record more than a hundred variants in the text of *The Beggars Bush* in the folio and 1647 and that of 1679. There seems no way in which to account for these variants except actors' and managers' changes on the stage.

The manuscript of *The Elder Brother*¹³ is written in the hand of a scribe, and there is no indication of stage use. The play, however, appears not only in manuscript but is printed in quarto in 1637 and 1651. The quarto was evidently set up from a prompt-book, the second quarto being printed from the first. Greg conjectures that in the printing of a third quarto (1661) use was made of an independent version. It may be, however, that we have to do in that issue with a more intelligent printer. Greg says definitely that the folio (of 1679) text is a careful reprint of the fifth quarto. There was no fifth quarto, but what he says may be true of a fourth quarto that appeared in 1678. The quartos, which print much verse as prose, agree pretty closely with the manuscript. Some point is made by Greg of the fact that the manuscript agrees sometimes with the quarto of 1637 and sometimes with that of 1651. This, however, seems to have come about because the printer of the latter has made certain easy corrections in the text he was reprinting and in these cases brought it into agreement with original readings present in the manuscript. The state of the manuscript seems to indicate that it is a scribe's transcript of a clean copy, and such collations as could be made or found indicate that the quarto was printed from a theatrical adaptation of that clean copy.

*The Honest Mans Fortune*¹⁴ has points of interest. The occasion of the preparation of the manuscript is perfectly revealed. It is written throughout in the hand of a playhouse

scribe and is a transcript made for the revival of the play, which had been performed in 1613. In 1624 it was re-licensed by Sir Henry Herbert, "their original being lost." The manuscript itself is a revised version, since it removes inconsistencies, makes a few changes in language, omits one whole scene and avoids indecencies. It provides for a considerable number of theatrical cuts and was itself a prompt-book. The lost original was, however, found and it served for copy in the printing of the play in the folio of 1647. It is a stage version of a considerable degree of degeneration and illustrates that process. Deductions have, however, been to some degree offset by conjectures as to revisions in the manuscript.

*Demetrius and Enanthe*¹⁵ is a manuscript version of the play printed in the folio of 1647 under the title *The Humorous Lieutenant*. The manuscript is in the hand of the scrivener Ralph Crane¹⁶ and is elaborate in stage directions and chirography, but shows no evidence of use on the stage. The folio, on the other hand, has been censored, prepared for acting and cut. It was certainly printed from a prompt-book. Crane may have worked from a theatrical version and one does not know what editorial changes he may have made; but disregarding that factor, the two texts offer a perfect example of what use on the stage might do to a literary original.

*The Woman's Prize, or The Tamer Tam'd*¹⁷ appears in the Beaumont and Fletcher Folio of 1647, a version printed from a prompt-copy if one may judge from the practical nature of the stage directions. From this point of view the manuscript version seems similarly derived, but the folio has been more carefully marked for stage presentation. The fact that there are some variations in stage directions and some differences in texts makes it probable that the folio shows the greater stage modification of the two.

Dramatic manuscripts of plays by other authors than Beaumont and Fletcher of which there happen to be related documents for comparison yield a good deal of information about the effects of staging and are worth reviewing.

The Country Captain by William Cavendish, duke of Newcastle¹⁸ was printed by Samuel Browne at The Hague in 1649. There are no collations available, and both versions are difficult to consult. Sir Walter Greg regards The Hague version as revised.

The manuscript of *The Court Secret* by Shirley¹⁹ is regarded by Sir Walter Greg as a transcript of foul papers. The play was printed in Shirley's *Six New Plays* (1663) where it is stated that the play was "Never acted, but prepared for the scene at Black-Friers." The play in manuscript is extensively revised, probably by the author, but, strangely enough, these revisions do not appear in the printed play. *The Court Secret* was on the stage in the repertory of the King's Company, and the printed version seems to have been set up from a prompt-book. It is hard to see what Shirley could have meant by his statement that the play was never acted. An edition for the Malone Society by Rebecca G. Haworth has not been found.

Of *Hengist King of Kent, or The Mayor of Queenborough* by Middleton²⁰ there are two manuscripts, both written by the same scribe apparently from the same original. Both have the features of prompt-books—actors' names for characters, indicated deletions, prompter's stage directions. Both must be the scribe's copies of a prompt-book. The play was entered in the Stationers' Register, September 4, 1646, and again on February 13, 1661. During the latter year a quarto of *The Mayor of Quinborough* was published as having been "acted with much applause at Black-Fryers by His Majesties Servants." The printed version is fuller than that of the manu-

script and has a different ending not thought by Bald to be Middleton's. Bald conjectures that the quarto was printed from a private transcript. This, however, is subject to some doubt in view of evidence in the quarto version of stage alteration. The printed version is moreover simpler than that of the manuscript and has many synonymous variants. The quarto text may very well rest on a stage version later and more greatly altered than that of the manuscript.

The Inconstant Lady by Arthur Wilson²¹ appears in three different manuscripts: (1) the Lambarde volume, Folger Shakespeare Library, thought by Bald to be an early version of the play; (2) Bodl. MS. Rawlinson Poet. 8, regarded as a presentation copy in the author's hand, and (3) Bodl. MS. Rawlinson Poet. 128, apparently a badly degenerated stage version with theatrical cuts amounting to one-fourth to one-third of the play, with mislineation and garbling of the text. Bald regards it as a "bad" quarto. If so, it would seem to be an eighteenth-century transcript of a stage-worn original, particularly because, when its corruptions permit it to do so, it agrees with the two older manuscripts.

*John of Bordeaux*²² shows all the evidences of use on the stage: inconsistencies in plot, confusion of blank verse and prose, insertion of actors' name, abbreviation and stylistic chaos. It is a copy by what Renwick calls an ignorant scribe, and five other hands besides his appear in the manuscript. There is no other version of the play with which that of the manuscript can be compared, and the sole reason for mentioning it here is that its state is such that certain inferences may be safely drawn. Renwick dates it 1590-1594.

The copying of *The Tragedy of Nero*²³ was apparently divided among six different copyists, with corrections by still another hand. There is no trace of censorship or of use on the

stage, and one can only conjecture that it is a transcript for some special purpose of the author's original. The anonymous quarto, however, of 1624 (reprinted in 1633) is clearly set up from a theatrical version. It shows a number of cuts such as are found in stage plays and also changes words for the worse in the text. These of course may not be chargeable to the players, but, as we have already seen, are a customary feature of stage versions.

The manuscript of *The Poor Man's Comfort* by Daborne²⁴ is, according to Sir Walter Greg, written in a literary hand, not Daborne's, one hand throughout. It shows no trace of censorship and no markings that would indicate use on the stage. A quarto edition, certainly printed from a playhouse copy, appeared in 1655. Swaen's edition follows the quarto text, but supplies a partial collation with the manuscript. This quickly reveals that the stage directions of the manuscript copy are deficient, shows also that there have been some changes in the assignment of speeches and some theatrical cuts made in the folio. Our interest lies in the textual changes in the quarto.

The Royal Slave by William Cartwright²⁵ appears in five different manuscripts²⁶ and in three seventeenth-century editions, two in quarto (Oxford, 1637, 1640), and one in octavo in Cartwright's collected works in 1651. The situation is special. The manuscripts have no indications of having been on the stage, and the printed version is the author's final form. It does, however, have something to say about the finishing of a play.

It was of course necessary that the large body of Elizabethan and Stuart plays in manuscript should be subjected to examination before it could be said that all plays were habitually changed by the companies that acted them. It was

found that a majority of the manuscript plays afforded no factual evidence. A study of the remainder, however, confirms the opinion that plays were customarily altered when put on the stage and reveals the expected nature and extent of stage alteration and thus falls in line with the well known deductions drawn from printed plays. Some manuscript plays show great changes; others, changes in lesser degrees.

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NOTES

1. R. B. McKerrow, "The Elizabethan Printer and Dramatic Manuscripts," *Library*, 4. ser. XII (1931), 253-275; Evelyn May Albright, *Dramatic Publication in England, 1580-1640* (New York, 1927), pp. 317-384.
2. In the present degree of availability this is by no means an easy task. A few plays have been published in photographic facsimile. A few more in rotograph exist in various libraries, and some of these I have been able to examine. There are a large number of specimen pages that have been published in colotype, and these are sometimes useful. Beyond these the main reliance has been on editions in type facsimile, such as those of the Malone Society reprints and in *Materials for the Study of Old English Drama*. There are also a number of independent editions done with scholarly accuracy and some degree of completeness. The main quest has been for collations of texts, and in a few cases these simply do not exist. I merely explain, since in the result I have made no definite statement without what seemed to me to be adequate grounds. Statements based on secondary sources have been designated as such.

The chief secondary sources made use of in this study are: W. W. Greg, *Dramatic Documents from the Elizabethan Playhouses*. Vol. I. Commentary. Oxford, 1931; R. C. Bald, *Bibliographical Studies in the Beaumont & Fletcher Folio of 1647*. Supplement to the Bibliographical Society's Transactions. No. 13. Oxford, 1938; E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*. 4 vols. Oxford, 1923, and *William Shakespeare*. 2 vols. Oxford, 1930 (particularly "The Book of the Play," Vol. I); G. E. Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*. 2 vols. Oxford, 1941; F. S. Boas, "A Seventeenth Century Theatrical Reper-

- toire," in *Shakespeare and the Universities*. London, 1923 (confining to B.M., MS. Egerton 1994); W. J. Lawrence, "Early Prompt Books and what they Reveal," in *Pre-Restoration Stage Studies*. Cambridge, Mass., 1927. Other more specific references are noted in the text.
3. See the author's "Revised Elizabethan Quartos: An Attempt to form a Class," in *Studies in the English Renaissance Drama*. In Memory of Karl Julius Holzknecht. New York, 1959. Pp. 43-57.
 4. Most stage versions in this sense undoubtedly originated for the use of traveling companies of actors engaged outside of London. One should not, however, forget Alfred Hart's contention that the abbreviation of Elizabethan plays was necessary and customary on the London stage itself. See *Shakespeare and the Homilies*. Oxford, 1934. Pp. 77-153.
 5. Leo Kirschbaum, "Hypotheses concerning the Origin of the Bad Quartos," *PMLA*, LX (1945), 697-715, and other articles in learned journals; *Shakespeare and the Stationers*. Columbus, 1955. Pp. 257-279 *et passim*.
 6. See *A Game at Chess*. Ed. R. C. Bald. Cambridge, 1929. Pp. 34-36 *et passim*, and *The Plays and Poems of William Cartwright*. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. Madison, 1951. Pp. 166-170 *et passim*.
 7. It will define the scope of this study to enumerate these manuscript plays: *Aglaura* by Suckling, B.M., MS. Royal 18 C. xxv; *Sir John van Olden Barnavelt*, by Beaumont and Fletcher, B.M., Add. MS. 18653; *Believe as You List*, by Massinger, B.M., MS. Egerton 1994; *The Benefice*, B.M., MS. Lansdowne 807; *Bonduca* by Beaumont and Fletcher, B.M., Add. MS. 36755; *The Captives* by T. Heywood, B.M., MS. Egerton 1994; *Charlemagne or The Distracted Emperor*, B.M., MS. Egerton 1994; *The Cyprian Conqueror*, B.M., MS. Sloan 3709; *Dick of Devonshire*, B.M., MS. Egerton 1994; *Edmund Ironside or War hath Made all Friends*, B.M., MS. Egerton 1994; *The Escapes of Jupiter* by T. Heywood, B.M., MS. Egerton 1994; *The Faithful Friends* by Beaumont and Fletcher, MS. Dyce 10; *The Fatal Marriage*, B.M., MS. Egerton 1994; *A Game at Chess* by Middleton, Trinity Coll., Cambridge, MS. 0.2.66, Huntington Libr. MS., Rosenbach MS., Bodl., MS. Malone 25, B.M., MS. Lansdowne 690; *John a Kent and John a Cumber*, Huntington Libr. MS.; *July and Jehan*, Folger Shakespeare Libr. MS. 448.16; *The Lady Mother*, B.M., MS. Egerton 1994; *Love's Changeling's Change*, B.M., MS. Egerton 1994; *The Launching of the Mary*, B.M., MS. Egerton 1994; *The Parliament of Love* by Massinger, MS. Dyce 39; *The Queen of Corsica* by F. Jaques, B.M., MS. Lansdowne 807; *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*, B.M., MS.

- Lansdowne 807; *Sir Thomas More*, B.M., MS. Harl. 7368; *The Swisser* by Arthur Wilson, B.M., MS. Add. 34312; *Tancred and Ghismonda*, B.M., MS. Add. 34312; *The Telltale*, Dulwich MS. XX; *The Wasp*, Alnwick Castle MS.; *The Welsh Ambassador*, Cardiff Public Library MS.; *The Witch* by Middleton, Bodl., MS. Malone 12; *The Wizard* by Simon Baylie, B.M., MS. Add. 10306; *Woodstock*, B.M., MS. Egerton 1994.
8. B.M., Add. MS. 18653. See edition by Wilhelmina P. Frijlinck. Amsterdam, 1922; also A. H. Bullen, *Old English Plays*, Vol. II, pp. 201-314.
 9. Dyce MS. 10. See *The Works of Beaumont and Fletcher in Fourteen Volumes*. Ed. H. Weber. London, 1812. Vol. I, pp. 1-131.
 10. B.M., Add. MS. 36758. See Sir W. Greg, "Prompt Copies, Private Transcripts, and the Playhouse Scrivener," *Library*, 4. ser. VI (1925), 148-156, and the same scholar's edition of *Bonduca* for the Malone Society, 1952.
 11. MS. in Lambarde collection, Folger Shakespeare Library. For detail see J. Q. Adams, *The Dramatic Records of Sir Henry Herbert Master of the Revels, 1623-1673* (New Haven, 1917), pp. 49, 75-77, 82, 116. See also R. C. Bald, *Bibliographical Studies*, loc. cit., pp. 52-53 *et passim*; W. J. Lawrence, *Those Nutcracking Elizabethans* (London, 1935), pp. 194 ff.
 12. *Beaumont and Fletcher*. Ed. A. Glover and A. R. Waller. 10 vols. Cambridge, 1905-1912. Vol. II, pp. 208-280, 504-508.
 13. B.M., MS. Egerton 1994. See edition by Sir Walter Greg in *The Works of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher*. Variorum Edition, 1904-1912. Vol. II, pp. 1-100; *The Elder Brother*. A *Comedie*. Ed. W. H. Draper, (London, 1916); Waller and Glover, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 449-452, 496-499.
 14. Dyce MS. 9. See Bald, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-88 *et passim*; also Sir W. Greg, "A Question of Plus or Minus," *R.E.S.*, VI (1930), 300-304.
 15. Lord Harlech's MS. See edition by R. Warwick Bond in Bullen's variorum edition of Beaumont and Fletcher. Vol II, pp. 455-581; see also Margaret McL. Cook's edition for the Malone Society (1951); also Bald, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-50.
 16. See F. P. Wilson, "Ralph Crane, Scrivener to the King's Players," *Library*, 4. ser. VII (1926), 194-215.
 17. Lambarde collection in Folger Shakespeare Library. See Baldwin Maxwell, "The Woman's Prize, or the Tamer Tamed," *Modern Philology* XXXII (1934-1935), 353-363; also Bald, *op. cit.*, pp. 50, 77-78 *et passim*.
 18. B. M., Harl. MS. 7650, See Greg, *Dramatic Documents from the Elizabethan Playhouses*, loc. cit., pp. 362-363; also Bullen, *Old English Plays*, Vol. II, where the play is printed from the

- manuscript under the title *Captain Underwit*, where it was assigned to Shirley.
19. Worcester College, Oxford MS. See G. E. Bentley, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 63, 131; See Greg, *op. cit.*, pp. 346-348; Rebecca Haworth, "A Manuscript of James Shirley's *Court Secret*," *R.E.S.*, VII (1931), 302-313.
 20. MS. in Folger Shakespeare Library, and a second at Welbeck Abbey. See edition by R. C. Bald, New York, 1938.
 21. See R. C. Bald, "*The Inconstant Lady*," *Library*, 4. ser. XVIII (1937-1938), 287-313.
 22. Alnwick Castle MS. See edition by W. L. Renwick for the Malone Society (1936) H. Hoppe, "*John of Bordeaux: a Bad Quarto that never Reached Print*," *Studies in Honor of A.H.R. Fairchild*. Columbia, Missouri, 1946.
 23. B.M., ES. Egerton 1994. *Nero* appears in A. H. Bullen, *Old English Plays*, Vol. I, pp. 3-98, and in the Mermaid series under the editorship of H. P. Horne.
 24. B.M., MS. Egerton 1994. See edition of the play by A. E. Swaen, *Anglia*, XXI (1899), 373-440; also Greg, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 312-313.
 25. See *The Plays and Poems of William Cartwright*. Ed. G. Blake-more Evans. Madison, 1951. Pp. 165-186 *et passim*; also by Gwynne B. Evans, "Comedies, Tragicomedies, with Other Poems by Mr. William Cartwright (1651): a Bibliographical Study," *Library*, 4. ser. XXIII (1943), 12-22.
 26. Bodl. MS. Arch. Seld. B26; Folger Shakespeare Library MS. 7044; B.M., Add. MS. 41616; the Duke of Bedford's MS.; and Heber MS. 1043.